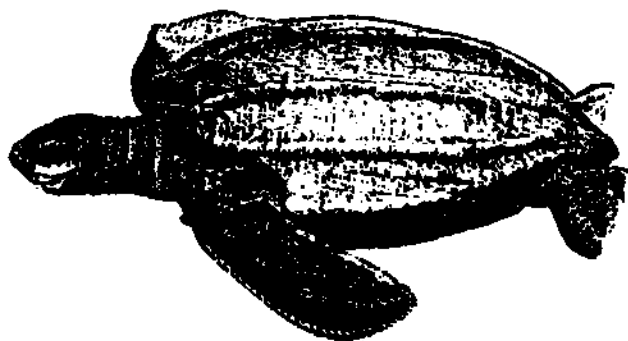


****ATTENTION****

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SEA TURTLES

Washington Department of Wildlife biologists have been seeing a lot of sea turtles this year, at least compared to other years. Since mid-November, at least five sea turtles of two species have been found on Washington's shores and biologists can only speculate on why the number of sightings has increased. Prior to this year, the last confirmed on-shore sightings were recorded in 1981, although unconfirmed sightings and marine sightings are more common.

Another twist to this winter's sea turtle saga is that a dead turtle found near Iron Springs, north of Ocean Shores, was apparently a Pacific ridley turtle, a species never before recorded in Washington waters. The other four recorded turtles were green sea turtles. The sea turtles most commonly sighted along Washington's coasts are leatherback, green and loggerhead turtles. All seven species of sea turtles worldwide are listed as either endangered or threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Although they are known to range along the Washington coast, following the relatively warm waters of the Japanese current, sea turtles rarely come ashore here unless they are sick, injured, dying or dead. In fact, sea turtles rarely come ashore at all, except to lay their eggs in the warm sand of tropical beaches.

Biologists speculate that one reason for the increased number of turtles coming ashore this winter may be the number and severity of winter storms. The theory is that rough sea conditions force the turtles out of the Japanese current into colder local waters where they suffer a type of hypothermia that weakens them and makes them prey to rough water conditions that bring them ashore. Both of the live turtles found on Washington's coast this year were suffering from low body temperatures and had to be rehabilitated at

the Seattle Aquarium before being released into California waters.

Other factors contributing to the increase in sightings may be a change in turtle populations following nearly two decades of protection in U. S. waters and a more aware public finding and reporting more strandings.

Relatively little is known about sea turtles and, although they all enjoy protected status in U.S. waters, their populations worldwide appear to be declining. Only the Australian flatback appears to be holding its own. Although humans, sharks and orcas are the only predators that affect adult turtles, nests are often destroyed and hatchlings suffer from a wide variety of predators. Scavenging dogs, gulls and other seabirds take a heavy toll of the tiny turtles as they scuttle seaward from hatching sites. Those who make it to the water must still avoid an ocean of other predators before attaining the size and armored protection that, barring accidents, will let them live for decades. Adult leatherback turtles often weigh between 290 and 590 kilograms and reach 155 centimeters in length. Green, loggerhead and ridley turtles are all smaller, but still reach 122 centimeters in length and 100 to 200 kilograms in weight. The turtles found on Washington's coast this winter ranged between 23 kilograms and 3.3 kilograms and were between 66 centimeters and 32 centimeters in length.

Human interference, both direct and indirect, appears to be the primary cause for the decline of sea turtles worldwide. Turtles regularly drown in fishing nets, or are slaughtered for their meat and shells when they come ashore to lay their eggs. Marine pollution, especially marine plastics, are another problem: sea turtles often apparently mistake discarded plastic bags for jellyfish, a common food item, and attempt to swallow them, with fatal

results. Sea turtles are omnivorous, consuming a combination of jellyfish, sea urchins, squid, crustaceans, fish and seaweed and this wide diet gets them into trouble in a sea full of garbage.

Indirect interference on nesting beaches, from recreational use and development, limits nesting success. If a turtle does find a suitable unoccupied beach, comes ashore and lays eggs, the nest is often destroyed by scavenging dogs, crushed by beach vehicles or packed down by overhead foot traffic so that the hatchlings cannot dig their way to the surface.

The increased number of sightings in Washington waters has led to a greater level of interest both from biologists and the public. Currently WDW efforts concerning sea turtles center around recovering any stranded animals, rehabilitating those who can be saved and securing dead animals for classification and study. As they become more common along the Washington coast, perhaps more attention will have to be paid, but for now they are an interesting addition to Washington's wildlife resource.

Please report sightings of dead or alive sea turtles to the Washington Department of Wildlife's Aberdeen office at 904 E. Heron, Aberdeen, WA 98520 or call (206) 533-9335 or the Washington State Highway Patrol.

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